

WASHINGTON, DC – Today, Rep. Pete Stark (D-CA) was joined by leaders of several leading Congressional caucuses in issuing a letter to the Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson requesting that he reverse his decision to provide over \$2 million in grants to social service agencies for promoting marriage to refugees who seek asylum in the United States.

“Most refugees come to this country to escape brutal repression and violence with little more than the clothes on their backs,” Stark said. “Facing difficult language barriers and cultural differences, refugees and their families need basic economic assistance to support themselves. The scarce resources now being diverted for refugee marriage counseling ignores their real needs and would be better spent providing refugees with education, job training and health care.”

Joining Stark in sending the letter were Rep. Joe Crowley (D-NY), Co-Chair of the Caucus on India and Indian Americans; Rep. David Wu (D-OR), Chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus; Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-MD), Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus; Rep. Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX), Chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus; Louise Slaughter (D-NY), Chair of the Congressional Women’s Caucus; and Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), Chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Reps. Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Hilda Solis (D-CA) also signed the letter.

Stark and his colleagues assert in their letter to Secretary Thompson that the new marriage grant program initiated in June under the Department of Health and Human Services’ Refugee Assistance Program violates the program’s stated purpose as outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act. That law makes clear that social service funds appropriated under the Refugee Assistance Program “should be focused on employment related services” and “English-as-a-second language training.” Furthermore, grants for refugee services are “to assist refugees in obtaining skills which are necessary for economic self-sufficiency.”

“The Federal government should not to be in the business of providing marital advice or pushing a specific lifestyle that some bureaucrat deems to be moral,” Stark said. “This is especially true when it comes to refugees whose very reason for seeking asylum in the United States is often to escape coercive governments. It’s offensive that refugees who’ve been tortured in their country for their religious or political views - or women who’ve been victims of sexual abuse - should have to be subjected to lectures on marriage. This does nothing to foster economic self-sufficiency among refugees as the law intends. It’s a gross waste of federal

funds,” concluded Stark.